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# Review of Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*.

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**Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xv + 227 pp. ISBN 9780231152563 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Karen Elizabeth Bishop, Rutgers University**

In Chapter Two of *Haunting Legacies*, Gabriele Schwab reflects on growing up in post-World War II Germany with her parents' stories of the war. She confesses that it took her "almost half a century to understand that the purpose of those stories was not to remember but to forget. They were supposed to cover up, to mute the pain and guilt and shame, to fill the void of terror" (43). Schwab also remembers being attuned to a discrepancy between what these stories related and what they seemed to hide: "It was as if the words themselves were emptied of the very feelings invoked in me when I was confronted with the facts of horror. It was not that the stories were devoid of emotions but rather that words and emotions did not quite fit together; words echoed falsely" (43). What got handed down to a young Gabriele in the aftermath of World War II, then, was a narrative that worked against itself, its own telling, its revelation. For the disjunction between how her parents remembered the war and what they intended their memories to communicate signalled a register of mortal trauma that remained inaccessible to this child even as its remains shaped her everyday life, her knowledge of family structures, and her sense of worth both within her home and, eventually, a larger national landscape.

The author reveals here the complexities of what she aims to work out in this wholly original and important book on the transmission of transgenerational trauma. For even as she advocates – in a scholarly work that serves as much as testimonial as critical intervention – for the restorative function of storytelling and memory work, she acknowledges that stories serve different ends, might hide as much as they uncover, and quite often operate as placeholders for the unspoken. This is the vital duality that innervates the core of Schwab's work: we need stories to get to what is unspoken, but the never said – the cannot be said – is constitutive of how we narrate our lives, particularly in the wake of personal or historical trauma. Schwab's efforts are dedicated to investigating how the unspoken shows up in writing – in literary works, creative nonfiction and memoir – and what it reveals about the interior life of the author or the literary subject that would not otherwise be accessible. The author turns the driving confusion of her childhood into a critical prism through which she might make sense of the holes, traces, and "words filled with skeletons" haunting the texts that endeavor to represent what so many scholars of trauma have deemed unrepresentable (43). Ultimately, and rightly, Schwab shows us that indeed trauma is not unrepresentable, and offers up new interpretive tools – culled from her training both as a literary scholar and as a psychoanalyst – that we might use to decipher the complicated ways in which transgenerational trauma shows itself on the page.

*Haunting Legacies* situates itself in what has become, since the 1990s, a canon of critical work on post-Holocaust trauma and memory studies. Schwab, Chancellor's Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, works in a decidedly Derridean vein and, as proper to the field, invokes the scholarship of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Eric Santner, Marianne Hirsch, and, if dialogically, Michael Rothberg. But even as she uses this collective as foundation for her thinking, she builds a new critical methodology and comparative infrastructure that makes this work relevant not only to scholars of the Holocaust, but also to those scholars working on the effects of colonization in the

Americas, the legacies of slavery and Apartheid, the late twentieth-century Latin American postdictatorial transitions whose effects still reverberate, contemporary torture studies, and the difficult fate of child soldiers. Schwab does look at works by Art Spiegelman, Georges Perec, Ruth Kluger, Marguerite Duras, W. S. Sebald, and Phillipe Grimbert that all respond to the devastation of the Holocaust, but she also turns to *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, works that reflect on the massacre at Wounded Knee, Frantz Fanon's theories of decolonization, the Maori novels *Whale Rider* and *Baby No-Eyes* that narrate the fate of replacement children, Leonard Peltier's and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's prison writings, *Death and the Maiden* by Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, Italian director Liliana Cavani's film *The Nightporter*, and Ishmael Beah's recent memoir of growing up a child soldier in Sierra Leone, *A Long Way Gone*. In both its expansiveness and its effort to work out how trauma shows up in similar ways in writing from very different national traditions that responds to very different historical events, Schwab's work is a model of comparative investigation.

But at the center of this work is Schwab herself. It's a risky move, to be sure, not just to confess to the personal motivations for pursuing a scholarly course of study, but to use those origins as a prism through which to read and construct a larger body of work. For even as Schwab reaches out to understand how subsequent generations interpret and represent the trauma they've inherited from their families, she is working through the death of an infant brother who died during the war, her experience growing up a replacement child for a sibling she never knew, and the complexities of bringing up her own family in the aftermath of her own postwar childhood. This is to say, *Haunting Legacies* is a deeply personal book. But it's richer for it, because Schwab demonstrates in her elegant methodology the final purpose of her book: that the trauma we inherit from our families – however intangible, removed or covered over – has to be worked through, shaped into something, spoken in some form. We have to address what haunts us.

At the core of this difficult work is mourning denied, an “irresolvable, impossible or refused mourning of losses that occurred under catastrophic circumstances” (3). The refusal of mourning for whatever reason – in the hope of familial reconciliation, out of mortal fear, in order to move toward democracy in the aftermath of authoritarianism – buries the dead alive in crypts that form and deform our psychic lives and our language. Here Schwab draws upon the work on cryptonymy, on cryptographic writing that Derrida performs by way of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in his 1977, “Fors.” He investigates haunted writing from the dual perspective of autobiography, which in the author's estimation tends to wear its trauma like “raw scars,” and the invented modes of fiction, poetry and film that allow for a more “protected” and imaginative working through of catastrophe. In either case, deferred mourning shows itself on the page in a kind of cryptographic writing that “functions as a transformational object” by accessing “experiences that have been unconsciously registered without ever becoming fully conscious” (7). This cryptic script demands deciphering in order to break through to the narratives, and the mourning, it masks.

Schwab herself – and we may read perhaps her own cryptographic writing as it bears itself out in her scholarly work – seems to be learning how to mourn not only her brother, but also to mourn both the girl she might have been had he never died and her hatred for growing up German in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman, she tells us, mourns his own “death-in-life” in his graphic series *Maus* as he becomes a “speaking corpse” that stands in as a necessarily failed

“sign that must replace the absence” of his dead brother (15, 37). And Phillipe Grimbert, as recounted in his 2004 autobiographical novel *Secret*, has to fill in narrative gaps, decipher silences, and decode archives in order to unearth the family secrets that will allow him to mourn the death in Auschwitz of an older brother he never knew he had, but with whom he had been communicating in the form of an imaginary friend since he was young. As other scholars have also shown, the refusal, or withholding the possibility, of mourning engenders all manner of psychoanalytic maneuvering – splitting, transference, displacement, the construction of screen memories – that show up in a myriad of literary and narrative techniques. Schwab endeavors to show us where these techniques of denied mourning appear so that we might better understand how trauma gets passed down between generations of families and, to some extent, also between larger cultural and political collectives.

Among the more interesting moves that Schwab makes in her work is the aligning of the trauma of the children of victims with the trauma of the children of perpetrators. It’s not a subject, let alone an argument, that has been much foregrounded in trauma or memory studies. The late Israeli scholar, Dan Bar-On, whose work Schwab cites extensively, took up the task in his 1991 *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989); Alan and Naomi Berger’s 2001 edited collection, *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001) speaks to possible reconciliation between children of victims and children of perpetrators; Susana Kaiser, working within Latin American Studies, touches on the subject in her 2005, *Postmemories of Terror: A New Generation Copes with the Legacy of the “Dirty War”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan); and Argentine filmmaker Gastón Birabén offers a complicated, if dramatic, view in his 2003 film *Cautiva* of the searing trauma a teenage girl suffers when she learns she was born a *desaparecida* in captivity and brought up by colleagues of her parents’ torturers, thus rendering her at once a victim and the daughter of a perpetrator. As exemplified by this notably short list, how to understand the trauma of the descendants of perpetrators of historical crimes, of crimes against humanity, is an important, difficult question that merits further consideration.

Schwab returns to this question in various places throughout the book, and dedicates Chapter Three to the topic. She calls for a “dialogical turn in trauma discourses” that realizes that both victims and perpetrators “are suffering from the psychic deformations of violent histories, albeit in different ways and with different responsibilities” (72). She goes on to stress that the trauma suffered by perpetrators and their descendants is part of the unattended mourning and trauma that make up a larger cultural and national crypt, so that in turning away from their legacies of violence, guilt, and shame, we refuse to attend to our own collective crypt.

In Chapter Four, focused on the problematic construction of identity under the sway of colonized psychic space, Schwab adapts Fanon’s stages of decolonizing the mind as processes of identitarian “decolonization” through which perpetrators might also advance. So where the colonized person integrates the reality of his/her history and acknowledges that his conflicted identity is “formed in the struggle with a violent history,” the perpetrator acknowledges his/her conflicted identity “as participant or inheritor of a violent legacy” and commits to working for “the collective struggle against oppression, violence and war” (108, 109). It’s an interesting possibility that the perpetrator’s mind might be at some point decolonized of the violent

historical agendas that occupied that psychic space. But while Schwab engages elegantly with theories that might substantiate such a move, such as an “affective economy of fear,” “a double wall,” “isomorphic oppression,” and “complementary oppression,” the possibility that a perpetrator might be liberated from what has, so to speak, colonized his/her mind denotes a process different from what his children might go through. For descendents of perpetrators of historical trauma cannot own their relationship to violence in the same way as one who is directly responsible for it. And while Schwab does further discuss the psychology of the perpetrator in her book’s final chapter, “Deadly Intimacy: The Politics and Psychic Life of Torture,” she doesn’t specifically take up the subject of the psychic inheritance of the crime of the torturer. So while she does undeniably important work in parsing the effects of trauma in the perpetrator – work that puts one in mind, for example, of the total mental disintegration of retired Argentine navy officer Adolfo Scilingo detailed by Horacio Verbitsky in his 2005, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (New York: New Press)—the book leaves open the question of how this trauma might be processed by the perpetrator’s descendents.

But this is not an entirely unwarranted move on the part of the author. To work out how inherited historical violence gets processed in second, third, fourth generations is an enormous task. It would require as much narrative evidence as Schwab puts forth for the working through of trauma by descendents of victims. And there just isn’t a proliferation of such examples. Schwab cites Sabine Reichel’s 1989 memoir, *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). But Reichel’s testimony speaks rather to growing up as part of the so-called second-generation in post-war Germany; her father’s trespasses were limited to voting for Hitler in 1933 before coming to detest the Nazi regime. If we reach beyond Holocaust studies, one might easily predict the psychological trauma that the daughter of Leonora, the protagonist of Argentine author Liliana Heker’s controversial 1996 novel, *The End of the Story*, will suffer when she learns that her mother, a revolutionary disappeared by the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s, becomes an informant for the junta and her torturer’s lover; but any interpretation here remains only a prediction, as the narrative doesn’t touch that unspoken future. Perhaps the best example of the trauma a child of a perpetrator might inherit is in the fictionalized version of one woman’s attempt to understand her father’s previous life as a torturer that Haitian author Edwidge Danticat offers up in her 2004 cycle of short stories, *The Dew Breaker*. As these scant examples show, there’s not a wealth of narrative – fictional or testimonial – to draw from in a study of how the descendents of perpetrators might process their inherited historical knowledge, guilt, shame, and confusion.

But what Schwab does do here is lay the crucial groundwork for future analysis of what one can only hope will be future narratives that elucidate how transgenerational trauma gets worked through by children of perpetrators. In working through the psychic deformation of the mind of the perpetrator, the author makes possible the working through of the psychic deformation that the perpetrator of historical violence will necessarily leave to his children. This is to say, *Haunting Legacies* exceeds its own boundaries, which is not at all a bad thing. Schwab opens up a space for future scholarship – perhaps work she will undertake herself – and lays bare the ethics and the urgency of such a task. Her book does important work elsewhere, but one of its most compelling efforts has to be in what it makes still critically possible, still critically necessary. And in this, Schwab both contributes to trauma and memory studies and the fields that take them up and pushes at their intersecting borders.

Toward the end of the work, Schwab discusses the Amy Biehl case, certainly one of the most remarkable examples of the kind of productive legacy that both victims and perpetrators of historical violence might forge for themselves and their children. Amy Biehl, an activist and Fulbright scholar researching women's political agency in Cape-Town, South Africa, was stoned and stabbed to death under the Apartheid regime in 1993. The four men responsible for her death were convicted of Biehl's murder, and spent five years in prison before being granted amnesty after testifying before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Two of these men, Easy Nofemela and Ntokbeko Peni, later came – in a move on Biehls' parents' part both exemplary and difficult to understand – to work with the foundation the Biehls had set up in their daughter's memory. According to Schwab, "Nofomela uttered the following words [to Biehl's parents]: 'I know you lost a person you love. I want you to forgive me and take me as your child'" (148). The legacy that Peter and Linda Biehl leave in memory of their deceased daughter, to the people of South Africa and to Nofomela, who asks to be their child, is one of forgiveness, empathy, and, in the words of Angela Davis, "reconciliatory justice." And the legacy of atonement that Nofemela and Peni stand to leave their own children is now significantly different from what it might have been had they not cared to rewrite their own narrative of historical violence.

These new legacies of trauma bequeathed and inherited are what Gabriele Schwab ultimately gestures toward so eloquently in *Haunting Legacies*. If we might only learn to attend to mourning as yet refused – decipher the trauma deeply embedded in language, speak what cannot be spoken, and perhaps even assimilate the unforgivable – we stand a chance at breaking the cycles of violence that shape so much of our history.